

Lloyd C. Douglas' First Novel

A rare copy of novelist Lloyd C. Douglas' first published work is a recent addition to the Ohio Historical Society's library. The book was discovered by Pat Young, assistant librarian for technical services, in the process of sorting acquisitions from the Westerville, Ohio, Anti-Saloon League collection.

Published in 1905 while Douglas was pastor at Lancaster's English Lutheran Church, nearly twenty-five years before he was to achieve world-wide fame with his first best-seller, *Magnificent Obsession*, the novelist's initial effort sold less than five hundred copies. A brief religious tale that Douglas himself considered unsuccessful and a disappointment, *More Than a Prophet* was loosely based upon the life of John the Baptist. Its literary merit has been wryly summed up by the author's daughter, Virginia Douglas Dawson: "It was called a novel, but anyone picking it up for a little light entertainment would be disappointed to say the least. Its pages stutter with *dosts*, *shalts*, and *hasts*. Gabriel and Beelzebub converse lengthily while their respective legions stand around casting shade or shine according to which climate they represent."

The book remains of interest largely because it was Douglas' first work, was published while he lived in Ohio, and is something of a literary rarity. It stands in marked contrast to the popular, didactic, best-selling novels of his maturity.

The young minister with literary ambitions, fresh from divinity school at Wittenberg College, wrote *More Than a Prophet* during his first charge, at North Manchester, Indiana. Moving to Lancaster, Ohio, in 1905, he borrowed enough money from a parishioner, a Lancaster furniture dealer, to publish the book. Douglas' disappointment was so great that he did not publish another book until 1921. By then he had moved his family to Akron, Ohio, having served churches in Washington, D.C., Champaign, Illinois, and Ann Arbor, Michigan, during the years since leaving Lancaster in 1909. In an Akron newspaper interview, Dr. Douglas himself was to aver that his book-writing career dated no further back than 1918.

Liberal and outspoken, Reverend Douglas did not hesitate to criticize, often making headlines as he flayed newspapers, chiropractors, the Ku Klux Klan, the lack of leadership in Congress, and the proposed World War I veterans bonus. Perhaps his brashest feat was suggesting that Akron might be a "hick town" populated by "rabble," this before a luncheon of Akron businessmen.



Lloyd C. Douglas, circa 1905.

Yet, when he left Akron in 1926, the *Beacon-Journal* mustered high praise — "a censor in whose presence dullness, smugness, convention or pretense should watch their step" and "a man too big in intelligence and conviction to follow the beaten path or the crowd."

While serving in Akron, Douglas wrote several non-fiction books which sold well, but not until he left Ohio for California did he again try his hand at writing a novel. The result, *Magnificent Obsession*, was published in 1929 and eventually sold over two million copies. Royalties from this book finally allowed him to pay his long-standing debt to Joe Brown, the Lancaster furniture dealer who originally financed publication of the minister's first book.

A long string of best-selling novels followed *Magnificent Obsession*, many of which are still in print and widely read — *White Banners*, *Disputed Passage*, *Forgive Us Our Trespasses* — culminating in two of his best known works, *The Robe* and *The Big Fisherman*. Interestingly, the germ of the idea for *The Robe* came from an Ohioan, and the book is dedicated to Hazel McCann, a Canton saleslady "who wondered what became of *The Robe*."

Lloyd C. Douglas' abiding interest in the ministry and medicine, subjects which form the background of most of his novels, stemmed partly from his early life, for both his father and his father-in-law, a trustee of Wittenberg College, were ministers, and his father later became a doctor. Ever modest, particularly about his literary attainments, Douglas admitted their avowedly didactic intent and did not consider his novels "great" literature. If, as has been said, he wrote novels for the grandchildren of the readers of *Ben-Hur*, this in itself is no mean achievement. Douglas expressed it better in his farewell Akron sermon: "I have tried to get religion into

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the present tense. I have wanted to hear and see God in contemporaneous life." Leaving Ohio, and eventually leaving the pulpit for the novelist's desk, he continued to do precisely that, with remarkable success.

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Echoes December 1978